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ABSTRACT

Preschoolers' perceptions of the reality of selected televised portrayals were investigated in this study. Three factors (type of event, character, and format) were examined as a function of the age and sex of the children. Thirty-six 4- and 5 1/2-year-olds were asked to judge the reality of specific televised events shown on videotape. The events depicted varied in aggressiveness, format (cartoon versus non-cartoon) and type of character (humorous or non-humorous). Responses were scored on the basis of children's judgments as to whether the portrayals were either real or pretend. While age and sex differences were absent, children's real-pretend judgments were found to be dependent on the format of the events observed. Cartoon events were viewed as fiction whereas non-cartoon events were generally seen as more real. Neither type of character nor type of event appeared to alter these perceptions. Implications for research on children's learning of televised aggression and prosocial behavior are discussed. (Author/MP)

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The Real-Pretend Distinction in Children's Judgments of Televised Events

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Footnote

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Abstract

Previous research suggests that children's understanding that television is fictional may be dependent on various factors inherent in televised events. Thirty-six 4-and 5½-year-olds were asked to judge the reality of specific televised events shown via videotape. The events varied in agressiveness, format and type of character shown. While age and sex differences were absent, children's judgments were dependent on the format of the televised events (cartoon vs. non-cartoon) rather than other variables. Implications for research on children's learning of televised agression and prosocial behaviors are discussed.

The Real-Pretend Distinction in Children's Judgments of Televised Events

A considerable amount of research has been directed at the impact of television on children. Salient areas of concern have been children's acquisition of aggressive (e.g. Bandura, Ross & Ross, 1963; Stein & Friedrich, 1975) and prosocial behaviors (e.g. Coates, Pusser & Goodman, 1976), as well as children's overall attention to and comprehension of televised portrayals (e.g. Anderson, Alwitt, Lorch & Levin, in press; Collins, 1975). In contrast, only limited emphasis has been placed on children's tendencies to interpret televised events as real or pretend. The ability to differentiate real from pretend events most likely influences both the amount and type of information acquired by children. Indeed, numerous researchers have argued that children's perceptions of events as real enhance the probability of attending to and learning from the observed events (e.g. Bandura, 1977; Horton & Wohl, 1956; von Feilitzen, 1976).

Little consensus exists among previous investigations concerned with children's perceptions of televised stimuli as real or pretend. Lyle and Hoffman (1972) interviewed first, sixth and tenth graders to determine their overall understanding of television programming. They discovered that while recognition of television as fantasy increased with age, even a majority of tenth graders viewed televised portrayals as real. Similarly, von Feilitzen (1976) found that Swedish preschoolers judged television programs as generally accurate representations of social reality. In contrast, Aggernaes and Haugstad (1976) found a marked <u>increase</u> in preschoolers' overall comprehension that television is pretend by age four.

Lack of consistency across previous findings lends support to the hypothesis that children's recognition of televised events as fictional is a

complex and gradual developmental process (e.g. Hawkins, 1977). Indeed, it seems highly likely that real-pretend judgments are dependent on several factors inherent in the events themselves such as type of event (aggressive or non-aggressive), type of character shown (human or non-human) and format of the event (cartoon or non-cartoon). For example, several researchers (e.g. Osborn & Endsley, 1971; Surbeck, 1975) have found increased physiological responding and reported "scariness" among preschoolers as a function of aggression shown on televised portrayals. While these data do not directly support the contention that televised aggression is judged as more real by children, they do point out differential reactivity to agression which might be related to perceptions of the events as more real.

We examined preschoolers' perceptions of the reality of selected televised portrayals in light of the three factors mentioned above (type of event, character, format). Further, we investigated these judgments as a function of the age and sex of children. Preschoolers were selected for study since Piaget (1935/1971) suggests that distinctions between real and fictional stimuli are acquired slowly, but progressively throughout the preoperational period.

Subjects were 18, 4-year-olds (9 boys, M age = 49.3 mos., range 42-57; 9 girls, M age = 50.5 mos., range = 38-57) and 18, 5½-year-olds (9 boys, M age = 64.7 mos., range = 58-71; 9 girls, M age = 67.0 mos., range = 58-73). All children were white, from middle-income homes, and were recruited through a private preschool in Fargo, North Dakota. While IQ information was unavailable, teachers' judgments suggested that all children were of average intelligence levels.

Two minute videotape selections were taken from each of the following

children's programs: "Sylvester and Bird" (cartoon with non-humans, or C/NH), "The Flintstones" (cartoon with humans, or C/H) and "The Brady Bunch" (non-cartoon with humans, or NC/H).[1] Each selection contained both mildly aggressive and non-aggressive actions as well as prominent central characters exhibiting the actions. Characters across selections were matched as closely as possible for type and salience of actions, music/noise accompanying actions, and presence of other characters. All selections were shown on a 24-in. color videotape monitor.

Children individually viewed selections in an unused preschool room and order of selections was randomized across children. After viewing each selection, the female experimenter asked children four questions (randomized for order of presentation) concerning whether specific events were real or pretend. One of the four questions for each selection concerned a mildly aggressive act.[2] Responses were scored on the basis of children's judgments as either real (1) or pretend (2).

Chi-square analyses produced no significant differences as a function of age or sex on any of the individual questions for any of the selections. However, subsequent tests for differences between overall proportions of children making real verses pretend judgments yielded numerous significant differences for specific questions. Namely, each of the events viewed in the C/NH and C/H selections were more likely to be judged as fictional rather than real (range of $\underline{z}$s = 1.97-4.30, all $\underline{p}$s $< .05$). In contrast, on the NC/H selection, children's judgments seemed somewhat dependent on the specific event. Children believed that when one of the characters in the NC/H selection cried that she was only pretending to cry ($\underline{z} = 2.74$, $\underline{p} < .05$). However, there were no significant differences in

the proportions of children judging each of the following as real verses pretend: the reality of a televised couple's marriage, whether or not the family shown was a real family, and the veracity of an injury incurred by one of the children (all $\underline{z}$s = 1.70, $\underline{ns}$).

Responses to questions within selections were then summed to yield overall real-pretend scores for each selection. These summed scores were entered into a 3 (Age) x 2 (Sex) x 3 (Selection) repeated measure ANOVA. The single significant effect was for Selection, $\underline{F}(2,67) = 20.12$, $\underline{p} < .0001$. Newman-Keuls analysis of the means for selections indicated that both the C/H ($\underline{M} = 7.47$) and the C/NH ($\underline{M} = 7.14$) selections were judged significantly ($\underline{P} < .05$) more often as pretend than the NC/H selection ($\underline{M} = 6.08$).

The results indicate that preschoolers' real-pretend judgments of televised portrayals are dependent on the format of the events observed. Cartoon events are viewed as fiction whereas non-cartoon events are generally seen as more real. Neither type of character nor type of event appeared to alter these perceptions.

These findings clarify previous research since other children who judged programs as real were watching non-cartoons (Lyle & Hoffman, 1972; von Feilitzen, 1976) while other preschoolers who judged programs as fictional were observing cartoons (Aggernaes & Haugstad, 1976). Overall, then, it appears that children as young as age four recognize that cartoon programming is "make believe", but continue to assume that non-cartoon programming is at least roughly similar to social reality well past the preschool years.

The implication of this finding appears to be salient. Specifically, in spite of cautions to the contrary (e.g. Stein & Friedrich, 1975), cartoons probably have less direct impact on children's learning than non-cartoon programs.

In fact, it would seem likely that non-cartoons play a much greater socializing role since children are more likely to accept these programs as real.

Additional research is necessary to extend children's real-pretend judgments to the acquisition and subsequent imitation of televised aggressive and prosocial behaviors. The mitigating role of these judgments in attention to and comprehension of programming warrants scrutiny as well. Finally, the eventual decline in judgments of television as real requires special consideration since it appears that non-cartoon television represents reality to children until such a decline occurs.

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Footnotes

[1]A program employing a non-cartoon format with non-human characters was not included for two reasons. First, such programs are extremely rare on television since humans are frequently cast into supporting roles (e.g. "Lassie"). Thus, use of such a program in the present study would yield little information concerning children's actual real-pretend judgments on programs they typically view. Second, inclusion of a fourth videotape selection would have lengthened the overall time children participated in the experimental session to over 20 minutes and consequently might have introduced a fatigue factor.

[2]To ensure children's comprehension of questions, each question was extensively piloted with a separate sample of children. The specific questions are available upon request from the first author.